

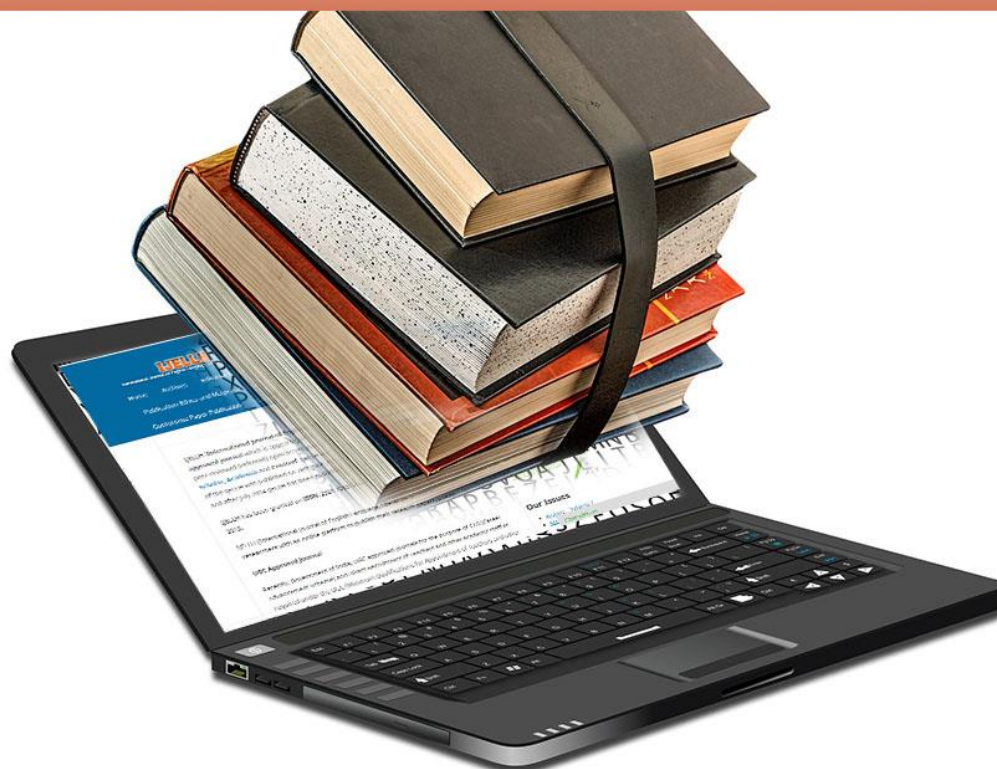
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*The Power of Women's Politics: A Comparative Study of the Select Works of Amitav Ghosh
and Arundhati Roy*

Abstract

Women's Studies, with its emphasis on ascertaining the role of female identity in the society through detailed analysis of literal and social representations, has achieved considerable success in ameliorating their general position. In power discourses, women have mostly been rendered a subaltern status in the past which has been mitigated through persistent efforts at centralizing women's experiences and highlighting the part played by oppressive regimes in subduing dissenting voices. The Indian- English writers Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy also evoke a similar concern regarding the prevalent issues relating to women's status-quo, yet defend their individuality successfully by employing tactics to subdue dominant strategies of oppression thereby aligning to the project undertaken by the Women Studies collective. This paper aims to examine the representation of women characters in Indian- English literature and their tryst with power through Ghosh's female characters in *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *In an Antique Land* (1992), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Dancing in Cambodia* (2002), *At Large in Burma* (2002) and Roy's stand regarding

power politics as a female writer herself as revealed in her essay, "Public Power in the Age of Empire" (2004). Situating them along Spivak's theorizing on female subalterns and the ensuing complexities of expression in a global scenario that privileges male narratives, the present study concludes that counter- mechanisms can be evolved to surpass cultural and political constraints. Such depictions facilitate women empowerment and are contraindicated for the advancement of humanity.

Keywords: Women Studies; Power-Gender Relations; Spivak-Subaltern; Amitav Ghosh;

Arundhati Roy

What is power? What is so mesmerizing about it that life turns worthless in comparison? Is there a single spot in this planet that is free from its manacles? But, where is it most rampant? Politics? Right from the time of kingship to that of democracy, thirst for power has been a universal phenomenon. "Politics" is defined as a methodology or activities involved in governing a country. However, the present situation is that the protector has become the detractor. Unfortunately, power politics is only a starting point that results in the collapse of established sanctums like culture, language and literature, knowledge, media, gender relations and ultimately human identity itself; making it difficult to differentiate between human/ animal. It is in this context that the present paper aims to establish the most neglected, yet undeniable association between women and power.

I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse, perhaps, to be locked in. (Woolf 24)

Woolf's remark about the status of women is significant because she envisages a daring female spirit who refuses to bind herself to the established norms that restrict her and refuses to be satisfied with a superficial freedom granted to her so that she may be silenced. In retaliation to these strategies, several efforts have been made to secure equal opportunities

for women and other marginalized sections of the society. Women Studies emerged as an area of research and development to hasten this project of social commitment. Its history can be traced four decades back when the UN declared 1975 as the International Women's Year and held the historic world conference of women in Mexico. The period from 1975 -85 was also declared as the International Women's Decade. Women's Studies got inculcated into the university system after the First National Conference of Women's Studies held at SNDT Women's University, Mumbai in 1981. Its entry into the academia has led to a remarkable change in the overall approach towards women and has generated immense knowledge about the areas specific to women and their contributions to the world that were earlier ignored by the patriarchal history.

The initial focus of the collective was primarily on female gender oppression. It then moved from issues pertaining to women alone to include transgender and other marginalized groups and also coupled with activism. Thus it legitimised 'non-formal' sources of information like oral history, personal narratives etc. Apart from these, it also promotes translations of literary works that portray women's issues. Authors foreground unrecorded aspects of women's lives through their works. They challenge historical and stereotypical representations that neglect the experiences of a major part of the population thereby reconfiguring female and other subaltern identities in the power groups by employing tactics as a tool to facilitate dissent.

In Ghosh's novel one comes across many such powerful female characters who transcend the challenges thrust upon them. In *The Circle of Reason*, Zindi represents the survival tactics of the migrant women. She runs an establishment on her own in an alien land and provides a source of income for many destitute immigrants by helping them find jobs as construction worker, accountants etc irrespective of their illegal status in that country. Tha'mma in *The Shadow Lines* is the heroic woman who is proud of her free will and

contribution to freedom struggle. After her husband's death, she secures a job and nurtures her son without depending on others. This sense of independence and readiness to work hard imparts her strength and courage to exert her individuality in all circumstances.

Mangala surpasses the boundary of science that Ghosh subjects to debate in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. She embarks on risky terrains to achieve her goals and to secure eternity for human kind through mysterious means. Dolly, the court dancer of *The Glass Palace*, epitomizes resilience. Her patience and calm nature at the face of difficulty is something to be modelled on. Yet, she does not fail to live the life she desires by the end of the novel. Nilima, in *The Hungry Tide* represents the role of women as activists. She single-handedly runs the affairs of her Trust and fights for the emancipation of tribal women. She is unique in that she is a character who, unlike her husband, has successfully achieved a balance between idealism and practicality. Chea Samy who retrieves art from terror in *Dancing in Cambodia* and Aung San Suu Kyi, the symbol of power, in *At Large in Burma*, all exemplify the female contribution to the mission of repressing power and its allied functions.

Spivak in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak", evaluates the plight of the female as the subaltern. She re-reads the meaning behind Sati and projects it as an act of resistance. The challenges in speech-act are highlighted. Thus, her theorization opens new spaces for resistance. It also reinstates the role of literature in positively intervening for improving the status of women. Counter- mechanisms can be evolved to surpass cultural and political constraints. Literary depictions facilitate women empowerment and are contraindicated for the advancement of humanity. The representations can also be neutral and judicious. Further, research to question discourses aimed at subjugation should sustain.

Arundhati Roy, on the other hand, challenges the notion of democracy in an era of corporate globalization expanding it to global levels. Roy's "Public Power in the Age of Empire" provides a contrast between Indian and American power structures and its relevance

globally. In India the government, *sarkar*, is separated from the public. This separation seems to be unsubstantial only in the case of rich people whereas in America, the government and the people are made to look like one so that the latter have to suffer for the misdeeds of the former. Thus it is similar to what terrorists do, making the innocent suffer. Interestingly those in power are elected by the same people who suffer at their hands. This is what Roy calls the Age of Empire.

In order to enjoy the benefits of power, it must be distributed. The constitution of a democratic nation sees to it that the power is distributed, but in today's society the power distributed thus, does not confine to the limits of a nation. Instead it lies with the corporates. Roy gives the example of famous people like Nelson Mandela to show how challenging it is for individuals to keep themselves away from corruption once they shift position from opposition to ruling party, "To imagine that a leader's personal charisma and history of struggle will dent the corporate cartel is to have no understanding of how capitalism works, or...how power works." (Roy 297)

This is where public power becomes significant; when power can cross borders its resistance should also forget boundaries. Just like leaders being reduced to symbols, resistance also breaks into symbols or spectacles in the form of mere demonstrations. Resistance is threatened by a "well constructed" media, fake NGOs "that can employ local people who might otherwise be activists in resistance movements" (314). On a positive note these challenges signal towards the strength of these non-violent movements, which, if not curtailed, would be strong enough to overthrow disruptive power.

In conclusion; in both the writers under study, the focus is on the politics of dissent as the need of the hour. Resistance, even though appears futile in the beginning, can bring about change with sufficient time. They might be in trickles at first but they are there all the same. As Roy advocates, we must globalize dissent itself, because we are at a point where we have

nothing *more* to lose. This dissent need not be always violent as history proves that all violent appraisals have been counter revolutions in the end, a sort of departure from the initial goals. Since one risks much, one must demand more, no matter whether it is in the capacity of an individual or as an institution.

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